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The Witness: A Spy You'd Never Suspect

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Washington, March 7.—There is nothing in his looks or manner to indicate that Francis Gary Powers turned the world on its ear.

He had been the fuse which exploded a summit meeting. He had been damned as the most notorious spy since Mata Hari, and he had been praised as a lonely hero in the fight for freedom.

And yet, as he threaded his way through the crammed Senate caucus room yesterday to tell his story at last, the common reaction of those who would judge him was this: What an ordinary looking chap, what a far cry from the common conception of the trench-coated espionage agent or the devil-may-care mercenary.

He has coal black hair. He has a placid, almost expressionless face. His soft voice is not quite a falsetto, but nevertheless far higher than the sonorous tones of the Senators who questioned him.

Only his eyes gave him away as he endured his ordeal of inspection. They leaped and darted as he spoke.

He seemed quite unsure of what reception to expect here, what judgment was being passed as he tonelessly and rather glibly told the details of his saga.

His laugh always seemed tentative. When something amusing was said, the corners of his mouth would reach back and his lips would part to begin to laugh, but laughter never really came. It seemed as though he dared not treat a moment of this experience with levity. It seemed as though he were constantly afraid the joke might be on him.

He told his story in fantastic detail—which Russian sat in which seat of which car on the way to which jail at which stage of this unique paragraph in history. He seemed prepared to go on for hours. He did indeed speak for nearly an hour without interruption as he told the bulk of his tale, and he seemed a little disappointed when the Senate Armed Forces Committee Chairman, Richard Russell, hurried him as the afternoon got old and the snow clogging the roadways began to concern the Senators more than the recapitulation of an incident they'd all rather forget.

He did not arrive alone. The Central Intelligence Agency's general counsel, Lawrence Houston, sat beside him and a phalanx of CIA aides lined up behind him to offer help. But he needed no aid.

The atmosphere was unreal. There was the unbelievable spectacle of an intelligence agent, a spy, sitting in public committee telling the details of his profession to a roomful of reporters and cameramen. Many old-line British and German master spies must have died in their graves.

Eventually it was Francis Gary Powers who reached the happy climax: how the Russians packed him off for Berlin and freed him. As he turned to leave his way through the curious, somber crowd that had gathered from now on.

"Oh," he said, "I was toward the men who hovered at his elbow."
Like what?
"Like a man who was remembering still to do."